

# Dover Train Ferry Dock

**Joe Harman**

*Written in 1988*

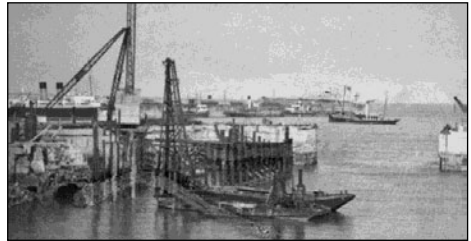
In 1933 not far from the Crosswall terminus of the Dover trams a start was made on a large engineering project. I had discarded my old no.2 Brownie camera for a vest pocket-folding Kodak and began to take pictures of the work going on. This camera would fit snugly under my tramway uniform and was to hand if needed to capture some event. Our terminus was right outside the Hôtel de Paris and this caused me to ask the landlady, Mrs. Cone, if I could go on to the roof to take some of my pictures and to this she readily agreed.

One day, when I was on late shift, I clambered out on to the roof to record the work that had begun on the construction of the dock gates. The resulting pictures were shown to some of the workmen and they suggested that I should show them to the foreman. I was duly escorted into the presence of Mr. Hardgraft; he was delighted and asked me to get some copies done. He knew that the bosses in Glasgow would be interested as no official photographs had been taken. I was then accepted and as a result was able to wander in and out and add to my collection of pictures of the work in progress. I took photographs of groups of the workers and was able to sell postcards at sixpence a time, which almost covered the cost of my films! I made some good friends among the workers and they kept me informed of progress and also when to be available.

One day I was warned off by a new overseer, but it was my lucky day as a short while later one of the one hundred and fifty foot derricks collapsed. I must confess that next day I slipped in to photograph the twisted remains. I continued with my recording until the day before the Southern Railway took possession and managed a shot of the first trucks being shunted on to the Hampton Ferry.

At the beginning it was planned to build a coffer dam and construct the dock inside. The pile drivers began work and chalk was rammed down between sheet piling. The engineers, however, chose to ignore the views of local seafarers on the effects of the easterly gales. We did get a sustained blow that year and the coffer dam was in a right mess. A fresh start had to be made and they called on the services of Sapper, the Dover Harbour Board's floating crane, to remove the twisted piles. I came to work one day, and was told that Sapper had pulled itself under water because the piling would not budge.

Ten-ton concrete blockswere then laid round the outside with the help of divers. A caisson weighing five-hundred and twenty-five tons had been made on the Tyne; this was floated down to go across the entrance of the dock. Then a number of pumps were placed in position, but due to fissures in the chalk they could not keep pace with the inflow of water. In January 1935 a special dredger was brought in and this gradually removed the faulty layer of chalk. It took until the autumn to finish the job. The divers then went down and levelled off the floor of the dock and assisted in the laying of concrete blocks until the whole of it was impervious to further seepage.



*Construction of the Train Ferry Dock Dover*

This caused delay and extra expense, and the special vessels, Hampton, Shepperton and Twickenham, arrived too early. These ships had coal-fired boilers, until converted to oil in 1947. At first they were all under the British flag, but in 1937 the Twickenham was sold to the French.

During 1935 a wall had been built across part of the Tidal Harbour to reclaim land for the railway tracks. The infill was shingle from the beach at Dungeness, brought in by rail. When this was completed it was possible to start on the dock gates close to the Crosswall footbridge and old fish market. Staging was built out into the Tidal Harbour to make a platform for the construction of the sill on which the gates were to be hinged. I had the privilege of going down inside the sill while it was being assembled.

I could have made good use of ear muffs and I still marvel at the skill of the gangs as they tossed the hot rivets from the forge to the fixing place, using pneumatic hammers. Then there was the day when the structure was lowered into the water by large jacks, which had been placed on massive beams to carry this out. It was then towed into the Granville Dock. Mr. Hardgraft was in the forefront of the operation to get it safely into the dock.

While all this was going on they had been completing the dock gates, adding the hinge portions of greenheart timber, which was shaped with the use of adzes. The first gate was launched about six months later down a special ramp. The rear portion was raised and chocks put in place, but I was unable to be present. However, I was in a good position for the second launch in July 1935. Between the launchings there was a serious accident when a steam railway crane toppled over the seawall.

The dock was now taking shape and they took the caisson away to float the sill and gates inside. The contractors had now erected the

pump house with a pit down below sea level. It was necessary to make an entrance for seawater to be fed to these pumps and a small coffer dam was built outside the wall. I was enticed to go down to inspect this effort, and possibly take a photograph. This was out of the question as it was very dark and the water was gushing through the sheet piling. The sill had now been placed in position and filled with concrete. The gates were then floated into their slots and the cables connected.

The linkspan was also being erected, which could only be engaged when the water level had been adjusted. The railway tracks had been laid and a transit shed built. The old customs building survived among all the activity and is still there. On September 28th 1936 the Hampton ferry was manoeuvred into the dock and the first railway trucks were shunted aboard.

On March 23rd 1988 I was able to go with other members of the Chartered Institute of Transport on a visit to see the old dock again, and it brought back vivid memories of some fifty years earlier. We were able to see the Cambridge ferry come in and one of the gates rising out of the water. We were then taken down to see the new berth, which was due to become operational on May 12th 1988. This berth is near to the gun turret on the Admiralty Pier and one hopes that it will stand up to gales similar to the one we had in 1934. It came through the hurricane in October 1987, but at that time much of the structure was not complete. Contractors' huts were demolished and railway lines wrapped round lamp-posts!

No doubt someone more expert might say that I have not used the right terms for some of the engineering work, but I am sure the friends I made in the ferry dock construction team would approve this record of their achievements. Sadly, when the new berth takes over the old dock will be filled in.